

# Oedipus in Africa

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One of the many controversial legacies of colonial rule in Africa has been the impact of the western educational curriculum on both secondary and higher education. But one of the ironic rewards of this burden has been that world theatre has been significantly enriched by the African drama that has been born out of the meeting of different cultures.

I am thinking especially of the plays that have been written in the past thirty or so years that re-write and/or adapt ancient Greek tragedies. The most famous of these is the version of Euripides' *Bacchae* by the Nigerian playwright and Nobel Prize winner, Wole Soyinka, that was commissioned by the National Theatre in London in 1973. Equally well-known, perhaps, is the adaptation in the same year of Sophocles' *Antigone* by the South African playwright, Athol Fugard entitled *The Island*, which was written in collaboration with the actors, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and which commemorates and re-enacts a performance of Sophocles' tragedy that was performed by prisoners in the notoriously brutal prison on Robben Island under the apartheid regime.

These two plays, however, are by no means atypical in choosing to enter into debate with the colonial past by re-working the Greek tragedies that form the basis of western theatrical history. The newly independent state of Ghana staged the first of these post-colonial adaptations in 1962 with a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* by Edward Kamau Braithwaite called *Odale's Choice*; and there have been numerous versions subsequently from both Anglo-phone and Franco-phone Africa.

The adaptation I want to discuss in this article is a version of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* by the Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi entitled *The Gods are Not to Blame*. Rotimi's version is generally considered to be one of Nigeria's most important plays, and even though it was staged in both London and Liverpool in 1989, it is still little known by students of classical drama.

Adaptations, of course, are plays in their own right, and they are interesting, above all, because they illuminate the societies for which they were written. But they can also bring to the fore meanings inherent in the original text that commentators have often overlooked or underplayed.

## The Yoruba and the Greeks

The Yoruba culture to which Rotimi belongs bears striking parallels with ancient Greek society. Soyinka has written extensively about the ties between the Greek and Yoruba pantheons, and more particularly about the ties between Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron whose powers include creativity, war and liberation, and the Greek god of contradictions, Dionysus. Dionysus' followers carry the *thyrsus*, Ogun's carry the willowly pole bedecked with palm fronds; Dionysiac rites culminate in the rending of a live quarry (*sparagmos*), similarly the rites of Ogun culminate in the tearing apart of a live dog.

These evident parallels between the Yoruba and Greek religious rituals are readily appreciated and explored in Rotimi's play. It is Ogun who presides over the action, taking on many of the prophetic powers of Apollo and the destructive ones of Ares. His shrine remains downstage throughout the play, coming into dominant focus in the scene in which Rotimi's Oedipus, Odewale ironically curses himself as he pledges vengeance on

the dead king's murderer:

[Odewale pulls out the matchet from the shrine, raises it and swears.]

Odewale. *Before Ogun the God of Iron, I stand on oath. Witness now all you present that before the feast of Ogun, which starts at sunrise, I, Odewale, the son of Ogundele, shall search and fully lay open before your very eyes the murderer of King Adetusa. And having seized that murderer, I swear by this sacred arm of Ogun, that I shall straightway bring him to the agony of slow death...* (Act I ii, p.24).

But it is not simply in terms of religious content that the Greek plays are easily assimilated into a Yoruba context. The form of Greek tragedy – its combination of speech, song and dance – makes it especially congenial in an African theatrical context, where traditional masked performances of singing and dancing continue to enrich contemporary drama.

Rotimi's play opens with a mimed prologue of the events surrounding the exposure of the baby, and the action is accompanied by choral singing, drumming and (what Rotimi calls) 'symbolic sound-effects'. Indeed it is the playwright's ability to create a kind of 'total theatre' – with spoken and sung words together with highly orchestrated movement played out on an arena stage – that makes his drama much closer to the tragedies performed in the fifth-century Athenian theatre than most western equivalents.

## Oedipus and the Biafran War

Although *The Gods are Not to Blame* was finished in 1966, it received its first production in 1968 during the Biafran war, Nigeria's civil war that lasted from 1967 to early 1970. It was inevitable therefore that the first audiences of Rotimi's play should have interpreted the action in the light of their immediate circumstances. As Rotimi comments:

*The root cause of that war was tribal distrust which is what I've worked into the play as the basic flaw of the hero, Odewale.*

When we examine Rotimi's version, in which the question of tribal identity is dominant, we are reminded how much importance the original also attaches to biological origins in Oedipus's quest for his own identity. In *Oedipus the King*, the emphasis is clearly placed on the blood relationships between the characters, rather than on the incest or the parricide. This distinction is an important one, as is borne out by Sophocles' very different handling of the myth in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus' past is discussed exclusively in terms of guilt and pollution.

In Rotimi's play, the parricide is unwittingly committed over a dispute about land; and that dispute is fuelled by tribal hostilities. The episode is hauntingly re-enacted on stage during a flashback scene in which Odewale relives the events that followed his departure from Ijekun (Corinth):

Old Man [stops laughing]. *You from the bush tribe, come to these parts and boldly call me 'THIEF'?*

Odewale. *Where am I from?*

Old Man [calling his men]. *Gbonka... Olojo-come, come, come quickly – come and listen to this man's tongue.*

[Two men run over with their hoes.]

Odewale's Voice. *That is the end. I can bear insults to myself, brother, but to call my tribe bush, and then summon riff-raff to mock my mother tongue! I will die first.* (Act III i, p. 46)

Although Odewale goes on to invoke the spirit of the god, Ogun as he commits the act of parricide, the gods of the title, like Sophocles own gods, are generally absent from Rotimi's play. It is their very detachment from the action that makes them clearly analogous to the neo-colonial gods on the international stage, who have precipitated the events of the civil war by imposing arbitrary state boundaries, yet now preside in a state of seeming neutrality.

However, at the end of the play, when Odewale has learned the truth about his biological origins and the enormity of his unwitting crimes, he insists:

*No, no! Do not blame the Gods. Let no one blame the powers. My people, learn from my fall. The powers would have failed if I did not let them use me. They knew my weakness; the weakness of a man easily moved to the defence of his tribe against others...* (Act III iv, p.71)

In Yoruba culture, fate is not fixed; tribal divisions stem from human frailties not eternal verities, and to resist those weaknesses is the first step in bolstering oneself against the imperial gods, who proceed by exploiting vulnerability.

### Oedipus/Odewale the 'tyrannos'

Like Oedipus before him, Odewale construes the accusations made by the priest Baba Fakunle (Teiresias) as part of a general conspiracy against him on account of his alien status. Later in the play with even greater reason than his Sophoclean counterpart, Odewale's fears for his own safety are compounded when he reflects upon the recent fate of the hereditary king: if the legitimate member of the royal house can be murdered, what horrors must lie in wait for him, the outsider.

Oedipus in Sophocles' tragedy discovers that he is basileus – the hereditary king – and no tyrannos after all – not an outsider who has ascended to the throne by force. Similarly Odewale in *The Gods are Not to Blame* discovers that he is not a member of the Ijekun tribe, with whom he had identified so strongly that he had been driven to murder in its defence; he is a Kutuje after all. Rotimi is clearly saying that tribal allegiances are not only damaging in an African context, but that they may also be entirely illusory any way; and that there exist between individuals in Africa far deeper ties that its citizens ignore at their peril.

In ancient Athens Pericles' citizenship law of 451 B.C. led to undue emphasis on biological identities: it insisted that both parents be Athenian in order to secure citizenship. When the series of plagues raged through Athens during the early years of the Peloponnesian War, the effects of that legislation were particularly acutely felt. Indeed, Plutarch tells us that when Pericles was forced to endure the death of his last legitimate son in 429, the legislation was exceptionally waived in sympathy for his plight in order to allow his son by his non-Athenian mistress, Aspasia, to become an Athenian citizen.

Sophocles' play is not necessarily condemning the legislation outright; but it is tempting to infer from Sophocles' very different handling of the myth elsewhere that the problematic implications of the Periclean legislation do inform his *Oedipus the King*. Rotimi's play, by contrast, unequivocally condemns the over-emphasis upon tribal origins that prevents an appreciation of true likenesses. In Odewale's case, his tribal allegiance prevents him from recognising his true, pan-Nigerian, pan-

African identity. Oedipus' question, 'Who am I?' thus becomes a truly pressing metaphor for black consciousness in the post-colonial world, where the struggle to forge an identity in the wake of the colonial past is a particularly arduous one.

But it may well be that Rotimi's re-working of Sophocles' tragedy – itself a spirited riposte to the long shadow cast by imperial rule – is also gesturing towards some kind of reconciliation between coloniser and colonised. After the highly successful Afro-American adaptations of the Oedipus plays such as Lee Breuer's rock gospel, *Gospel at Colonus*, and Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth*, which has recently enjoyed a successful run at the National Theatre in London, it is high time that Rotimi's powerful exploration of African identity in a post-colonial context receives the close attention it merits.

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